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Irishness between Myth and Brand

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Abstract

Ondine[1] (written and directed by Neil Jordan) is a modern fairy tale set and shot in Ireland on a low budget. Although the film is set in the present and makes reference to current issues, it is strongly influenced by clichéd and revivalist discourses, such as were nurtured by Irish romantic and cultural nationalism. Consequently, the film frequently lapses into stereotypically romanticised representations of Irishness and obsolete gender constructs, reminiscent of those popularised by Irish-American film productions of the first half of the twentieth century. These filmic versions of Ireland are part of an ongoing and global process, the commodification of all things Irish. From this vantage point, *Ondine* can be seen as one more label in the branding of an always already marketed Irish identity and culture.

Keywords: Irish national cinema, commodification of Irishness, Neil Jordan, *Ondine*, cultural nationalism, romanticisation of Ireland.

Résumé

Ondine *(écrit et réalisé par Neil Jordan) est un conte de fées moderne à petit budget, situé et filmé en Irlande. Si le film se déroule à notre époque et se réfère à l'actualité politique et sociale de l'Irlande, il évoque pourtant des clichés et des images liés au nationalisme culturel. Par conséquent,* Ondine *fait revivre des stéréotypes romantiques et des portraits de féminité et de masculinité obsolètes qui font penser aux films irlandais-américains de la première moitié du* XX*e siècle. Ces représentations filmiques de l'Irlande font partie d'un processus continu et global, c'est-à-dire la commercialisation de tout ce qui est considéré comme typiquement irlandais. De ce point de vue,* Ondine *peut être considéré comme une nouvelle « marque » définissant une identité et une culture nationales qui ont déjà été amplement commercialisées.*

Mots clés : Cinéma national irlandais, commercialisation de l'identité nationale et de la culture irlandaise, Neil Jordan, nationalisme culturel, vision romantique de l'Irlande.

1. *Ondine*, dir. Neil Jordan, Wayfare Entertainment, 2009.

> Identity, identity, identity. It's like a mantra in this country. I think the real reason we're so concerned about identity is because we're worried that we haven't got one[2].
>
> Ireland is a future which is always posited and never attained[3].

Neil Jordan is one of the household names of Irish film. His works cover a wide range of topics, yet many of them are set in an Irish context and are firmly rooted in the corpus of Irish national cinema. In his 2009 film *Ondine*, Jordan tackles the selkie legend from Celtic folklore, and mixes it with an updated version of Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* (1837) and Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué's *Undine* (1811). Selkies are half-human, half-seal beings that can shed their seal skin to live on land and make contact with human beings, but they must return to sea eventually. The film tells the story of Joanna (Ondine), a Romanian drug mule and prostitute on the run from the law and from her pimp. The opening scene shows Syracuse, an unsuspecting fisherman, who, as he hauls in his fishing net, finds Joanna unconscious in it and revives her (00:02:35). The circumstances of this rather unbelievable incident are only revealed towards the end of the film. Accepting her wish not to be taken to hospital, he grants her refuge in an old cabin that his mother used to live in. Syracuse's terminally ill daughter Annie finds out about the woman "from the sea" and draws the conclusion that her father has taken a selkie on land. Joanna gladly plays along and adopts the identity of the fairy-tale creature to hide her past.

Ondine comprises elements which, as Carole Zucker has highlighted in her study of Neil Jordan's work, have strongly marked Jordan's style as a writer and director, such as "Celtic myth and folklore; the fairy tale, Romanticism and the Gothic[4]". The film juggles two very different genres and moods, *i.e.* a romantic fairy tale and a realist thriller plot and thus displays an "in-betweenness" that Zucker, as well as Emer and Kevin Rockett have identified as a persistent theme in Jordan's oeuvre, where "everything is never, yet always, what it seems[5]". Another recognisable impact on Jordan's films is the "Celtic Twilight" literary movement and in particular W.B. Yeats's attempts to resuscitate and conserve a mythic Celtic past[6]. *Ondine* grew out of his fascination with Irish fairy tales and Yeats, as Jordan explained in a *New York Times* interview:

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2. Jim Sheridan in Harvey O'Brien, "The Identity of an Irish Cinema", *Reel Ireland*, no pagination, 2007, [*http://www.reelireland.ie/history. pdf*], last accessed 25 January 2011.
3. Colin Graham, *Deconstructing Ireland, Identity, Theory, Culture*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2001, p. xi.
4. Carole Zucker, *The Cinema of Neil Jordan: Dark Carnival*, New York, Wallflower Press, 2008, p. 3.
5. Cf. Carole Zucker, *ibid.*, p. 3; Emer and Kevin Rockett, *Neil Jordan: Exploring Boundaries*, Dublin, The Liffey Press, 2003, p.2.
6. Carole Zucker, *op. cit.*, p. 29-30.

> I've done so many things in Ireland about brutality and violence – punishing, unforgiving things […] I suppose I wanted to do something just gentle, like those early fairy tales of Yeats and Lady Gregory, which are terribly childish, terribly romantic, quite beautiful[7].

While seeking to avoid one Irish cinematic tradition, i.e. the depiction of Ireland's troubled past, *Ondine* slips into the opposite extreme. It vascillates between a re-mythologisation of Ireland in its reworking of traditional discourses of Irishness established during the high tide of romantic and cultural nationalism, and a more or less visible marketing campaign. Instead of showing an "authentic" version of contemporary rural Ireland, as Jordan claims he does in an interview with *Cineaste* magazine[8], his film frequently lapses into clichéd and obsolete discourses of landscape, gender and identity and is redolent of American-Irish film productions that have made Ireland and Irish culture popular worldwide.

Cinema and National Identity in Ireland

Cinema has had an enormous influence on the shaping of national images. This holds true particularly for Ireland because the modern idea of an Irish nation emerged almost at the same time as the medium of film. The Irish situation is also special in another respect. Film historian Kevin Rockett notes, writing in 1996, "out of over 2000 feature films on an Irish theme produced worldwide since the beginnings of the cinema, rather less than 200 have been made in Ireland itself and most of these only in the last fifteen years or so[9]". Irishness is thus very often a presence in cinemas worldwide that has not been constructed by indigenous Irish film-makers, but by outsiders of Irish origin in the third, fourth or fifth generation who seek to present their views of their (ancestors') homeland, of which they may not even have first-hand experience. In this particular case of imagining a country and a national identity one is and is not part of, Benedict Anderson's concept of the nation as a "cultural artefact[10]" which is created in the minds of people takes on another dimension. Anderson's defini-

7. Terence Rafferty, "Neil Jordan's Possible World of the Impossible", *The New York Times Online,* no pagination, 28 May 2010 [*http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/30/movies/30jordan.html?pagewanted=all*], last accessed 11 January 2012.
8. Cf. Paul McGuirk, "*Ondine*: Reworking a Foreign Fable: An Interview with Neil Jordan", *Cineaste,* Vol. XXXV (3), no pagination, 2010, [*http://www.cineaste.com/articles/emondineem-reworking-a-foreign-fable-an-interview-with-neil-jordan*], last accessed 11 January 2012.
9. Rockett in Martin McLoone, "Ireland and Cinema", Hill J. and Gibson Church, P. (eds.), *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 510.
10. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities, Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism,* 1983, London, Verso, 2006, p. 4.

tion of the imagined community as "both inherently limited and sovereign[11]" can hardly accommodate the estimated 70 million people worldwide who claim to be of Irish descent[12], and who group themselves under the umbrella-identity of the Irish diaspora. Anderson specifies that imagined communities cannot be distinguished "by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined[13]". It follows that there is no such thing as an "authentic" or "essential" Irishness forming the basis of a group identity, there is only what people consider as belonging to their chosen imagined community.

In their essay "Towards a Third Cinema" (first published in 1969), Argentinian film-makers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino subdivide these differences in the style of imagining nationhood into three categories, or groups of belonging, depending on the degree of independence of the respective cinemas. What Solanas and Getino call "First Cinema" are big-budget Hollywood productions aiming at a mass market rather than a national audience that do not in the least challenge mainstream thinking[14]. "Second Cinema" is defined as a slightly more experimental and sophisticated "auteur cinema", running on a lower budget, or "the progressive wing of Establishment cinema[15]". Finally, "Third Cinema" is a low budget, fully independent and oppositional cinema which questions dominant modes of film-making and seeks to make its audiences aware of ideological, political and aesthetic issues[16].

This tripartite structure can easily be applied to the current situation of Irish national cinema. Just like many (post)colonial cinemas, Ireland's cinema has always had Hollywood's shadow looming over its local film production. Until today, the classic filmic representations of Ireland are "First Cinema" Hollywood productions that have made use of conventionally breathtaking Irish scenery and prepared cinemagoers for a flood of films following the established successful formula. Luke Gibbons cites Robert Flaherty's *Man of Aran* (1934) and John Ford's hugely popular *The Quiet Man* (1952) as two examples of well-known American productions about Ireland[17]. Both films are classics of a period in Irish film history when the image of "romantic Ireland" was celebrated and at the same time infused with American ideas of wilderness and individuality, and fitted to the taste of a mass audience. On account of the financial constraints of

11. *Ibid.,* p. 5.
12. Martin McLoone, *Irish Film – The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema*, London, British Film Institute, 2000, p. 1.
13. Benedict Anderson, *op. cit.*, p. 6
14. Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, "Towards a Third Cinema", Nichols B. (ed.), *Movies and Methods, Vol. 1*, Berkley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1976, p. 51.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 52-53.
17. Luke Gibbons, "Projecting the Nation", in Cleary, J. and Connolly, C. (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 210.

Ireland's film industry, which until today is partly reliant on British or American funding, the menace of the "Los Angelesisation" of Irish cinema is still felt by many critics[18]. Irish avant-garde film-maker Bob Quinn claims that "Ireland has long been a figment of the American imagination[19]"", which is also due to the fact that the Irish diaspora is a large and attractive target audience[20]. Therefore, romantic Ireland, as it has been dreamed up by emigrants and their descendants who have nurtured idealised memories of a spatially and temporally remote "old country", continues to exist. Colin McArthur formulated the following axiom to Celtic film-makers:

> [T]he more your films are consciously aimed at an international market, the more their conditions of intelligibility will be bound up with regressive discourses about your own culture[21].

This is *Ondine*'s dilemma, and it is mirrored by the film's reception in Ireland and abroad, which according to the reviews in the *Los Angeles Times* (Web, 4 June 2010) and *New York Times* (Web, 4 June 2010) was rather positive, as opposed to merely lukewarm in the *Irish Times* (Web, 5 March 2010)[22]. In the terms of Solanas and Getino, *Ondine* is a film produced on a "Third Cinema" budget by a "Second Cinema" auteur[23] but which offers "First Cinema" images of Irishness. In the fol-

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18. Many factors have hindered the development of an "Irish-Irish cinema". The prevalent ideology of cultural nationalism, the cultural protectionist policies of the Irish Free State and the early Irish Republic under Eamon de Valera considerably hampered the growth of an Irish film industry. Films as icons of a new age and as products of mass culture were considered a moral threat to the sacred cows of the Republic, notably the Catholic Church and its teachings. The power of the Censorship of Films Act of 1923 was only diminished in the 1960s with the arrival of television broadcasting in Ireland and the inauguration of Seán Lemass's government, which is generally considered a turning point towards modernity in Irish history. Lance Pettitt dates the emergence of a national Irish cinema to the 1970s, but state support remained scarce until the 1980s when e.g. the Irish Film Board (Bord Scannán na Éireann) was formed (in 1981), but, lacking profitability, was suspended again in 1987 only to be then successfully re-established in the 1990s (Lance Pettitt, *Screening Ireland, Film and Television Representation,* Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2000, p. 28-41).
19. In Martin McLoone, *op. cit.,* 2000, p. 15.
20. According to the website of the U.S. Census Bureau, about 36 million US-Americans claimed to be of Irish descent in 2009 (*"*Selected Social Characteristics in the United States: 2009*", U.S. Census Bureau American FactFinder*, no pagination, no date, [*http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/ADPTable?_bm=y&-qr_name=ACS_2009_1YR_G00_DP2&-geo_id=01000US&-ds_name=ACS_2009_1YR_G00_&-_lang=en&-redoLog=false&-format=*], last accessed 11 January 2012.)
21. McArthur in Stephen Croft, "Concepts of National Cinema", in Hill J. and Gibson Church, P. (eds.), *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 392.
22. Donald Clarke, "*Ondine*", *The Irish Times Online*, 5 March 2010, no pagination, [*http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/theticket/2010/0305/1224265595095.htm*], last accessed 25 January 2011.Manohla Darghis, "Man Meets Mermaid (There's a Catch)", *The New York Times Online,* 4 June 2010, no pagination, [*http://movies.nytimes.com/2010/06/04/movies/04ondine.html?ref=neiljordan*], last accessed 10 Jan 2012. Betsy Sharkey, "Movie Review: '*Ondine*'", *Los Angeles Times Online,* 4 June 2010, [*http://articles.latimes.com/2010/jun/04/entertainment/la-et-ondine-20100604*], last accessed 11 January 2012.
23. Steven Rea, the Irish actor who plays in almost all of Jordan's films, including *Ondine*, insists that "[i]f any Irish filmmaker may be called an auteur, it is Jordan" (in Emer and Kevin Rockett, *op. cit.*, 2003, p. x).

lowing, I am going to explore how these images of Irishness, in terms of the representation of landscape, gender and identity are adapted and reworked by the film.

Landscape

In Irish cinema, landscape "has tended to play a leading role[24]". In *Ondine* it certainly contributes hugely to the film's visual quality. Shot on location in and around the town of Castletownbere, County Cork, *Ondine* portrays an area which is emblematic of the picture-postcard Ireland once promoted by films in the "romantic Ireland" tradition and now by the Irish tourist board. The small town is presented as almost anti-industrial, far away from any urban sprawl, and living off small businesses and fishing. In the opening establishing shot, the film makes use of the scenery to create a slightly sombre and misty atmosphere ideal for a mythical tale before slowly zooming in on the protagonist Syracuse's fishing boat surrounded by a leaden sea and sky and rugged islands (00:01:00-00:01:40). Seascapes are a recurrent locational motif in Jordan's work. Alain Chouinard and Emer and Kevin Rockett have pointed out two symbolic meanings attributed to watersites in Jordan's films: on the one hand, they stand for a threshold between reality and fantasy[25]. On the other hand, they "are treated as mise-en-scène of desire and sexual liberation [...][26]". Both meanings are reflected in *Ondine*. The sea is where Joanna miraculously enters Syracuse's world and it is also the backdrop for their love relationship. Fittingly, the colour scheme of the film ranges from grey to blue and is only contrasted by hills and meadows in endless shades of green. The dominance of these colours is striking even in details like cars, clothes or home interiors. In their darker shades, they transmit a certain roughness, but at the same time, as colours prevalent in nature, blue and green possess soothing qualities and thus create a very atmospheric setting. The alternation of the darker and lighter shades parallels the fluctuation of the storyline in *Ondine*. In the thriller plot linked to Joanna's criminal past, darker, almost gothic shots prevail, and in the love story which unfolds between the protagonists, the scenes are more colourful.

The colour scheme certainly taps into what is often referred to as the tourist gaze in Irish cinema[27]. The envisioning of a landscape that is at once aesthetically overwhelming and tranquil also corresponds to the image of Ireland in many tourist advertisements, and it is no surprise that Beara Tourism advertises

24. Gibbons in Emer and Kevin Rockett, *op. cit.*, 2003, p. 110.
25. Alain Chouinard, "Water-sites in the Fiction and Cinema of Neil Jordan", *Wasafiri*, Vol 25 (2), June 2010, p. 73.
26. Emer and Kevin Rockett, *op. cit.*, 2003, p. 109.
27. Martin McLoone, *op. cit.*, 2000, p.20.

the film and its setting on its website[28]. Apart from the beautiful scenery, what is striking about the Irish setting in *Ondine* is the conspicuous lack of modern technology and the old-fashioned air that permeates the small town and its surroundings. The digital age is largely absent; there is no internet and no mobile phone in the film and hardly any computers or TV sets. The actors and actresses are styled and dressed in a way that evokes a backwardness in tune with stereotypically pastoral representations of Ireland. Annie, Syracuse's daughter, calls the town "sartorially challenged" and "a supermodel's nightmare", when Joanna goes shopping for clothes with her and Syracuse (00:46:38). According to Jordan[29], Castletownbere was not re-designed in any way, but the Beara Tourism website shows that the local supermarket was renamed (from Super Valu to O'Sullivans) and that the draper's where Syracuse and Ondine shop for clothes was especially changed for the film to give it the look of the 1970s/80s. Gibbons claims about Ireland that "[i]f a Rip Van Winkle fell asleep in the 1950s and woke up in 1988, he could be forgiven for thinking that nothing had changed in between[30]". In the case of *Ondine*, the viewers may be forgiven for thinking that the film is set in 1988 instead of 2008 – nothing except for the soundtrack by, amongst others, the contemporary Icelandic band Sigur Rós hints at the new millenium.

The tradition of imagining Ireland as a predominantly rural country of small-town communities and small businesses is inextricably linked to the ideology of cultural nationalism, which has had a significant and lasting impact on Irish cinema, as several Irish film critics and scholars have highlighted[31]. Cultural nationalism developed in the course of the struggle for Irish independence. It was nourished, amongst other influences, by a romantic nationalism that glorified the never-neverland of a Celtic past as Lady Gregory and W.B. Yeats promoted it. Its most essential intention was to establish a counter identity to all things British, an identity fundamentally de-anglicised and de-industrialised, built on what were then seen to be the pillars of the Irish nation which was to be perceived as unique, historic, gaelic, rural, Catholic and self-sufficient[32]. This ideology was upheld long into the second half of the 20th century by both the Irish state and the Catholic Church through various means, ranging from protectionism to conservative and downright repressive measures[33]. Cultural nationalist values were always seen as

28. "Welcome to the Beara Peninsula", *Beara Tourism*, no pagination, no date, <http://www.bearatourism.com/ondine.html>, last accessed 11 January 2012.
29. See McGuirk, *op. cit.*, no page.
30. Luke Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture*, University of Notre Dame Press, South Bend, 1996, p. 83.
31. E.g. Lance Pettitt, *op. cit.*; Luke Gibbons, *op. cit.*, 1996; Martin McLoone, *op. cit.*, 2000.
32. See Martin McLoone, *op. cit.*, 2000, p. 12.
33. Pettitt cites e.g. the Censorship of Films Act, the control of the educational syllabuses (from 1922), the control of the national radio station (1926), the Censorship of Publications Act (1929) and the licensing of dance halls

building stones for an Irish nation, but, as Gibbons points out, this conviction comes close to the concept of invented traditions:

> [W]hat are now taken as traditional values – myths of community, the sanctity of the family, devotion to faith and fatherland – are not a residue from an old Gaelic order but are of quite recent vintage, dating in fact from what Emmet Larkin has called "the devotional revolution" in post-Famine Ireland[34].

Nevertheless, cultural nationalism has had such an impact on the politics of artistic representation, that landscape in Irish film is always tied in with political or ideological discourses[35].

In *Ondine*, landscape often represents a refuge from the evils of the modern world. Ondine's refuge, the cabin where Syracuse hides her after fishing her from the sea, lies hidden away, nestled in a green labyrinth of shrubs and bushes. The old-fashionedness mentioned before is exemplified here by the furnishings, decoration and equipment which seem to date from a by-gone era of Irish history. Nonetheless, the hiding place, which Ondine comes to call her "home" (00:55:05), gives her security from her pimp and a promisingly peaceful existence. For Syracuse, the "Freudian" cabin formerly inhabited by his mother takes on the notion of home again as Ondine starts to make it "homely", thus offering him a retreat from the troubles and temptations he daily confronts in his town-life existence. This is a recurrent pattern in romantic narratives set in Ireland: a female presence serves as a stabilising or even purifying influence on the male protagonist's life. Consequently, as Gerardine Meaney points out, "the woman personifies tradition and/or nature as well as Ireland[36]". The female personification of landscape can be found in the prototypical Irish romantic narrative *The Quiet Man* (1952), where the American idea of the Frontier is linked to the Irish West, behind which an untouched landscape implies a purity and innocence that cannot be found in the more urbanised and anglicised Eastern settlements. In *Ondine*, it is not the West coast but the Southern tip of Ireland which represents the "wild" Irish land and the rough sea as a man's conquered territory and by the same token stylises the land and nature itself as female[37].

(1935) (Lance Pettitt, *op. cit.*, p. 35). All of these measures served as ideological tools to curb the influence of British and American popular culture on Irish households and also to ostracise and criminalise all tendencies towards more sexual freedom.

34. Luke Gibbons, *op. cit.*, 1996, p. 85.

35. See Martin McLoone, *op. cit.*, 2000, p. 20.

36. Gerardine Meaney, *Gender, Ireland and Cultural Change, Race, Sex and Nation*, New York, Routledge, 2010, p. 24.

37. The fashioning of land as female is of course not an exclusively Irish phenomenon, but it is noteworthy that the notion of femininity has not just been connected to Irish scenery. 19th-century studies of Celticism, such as works by Matthew Arnold and Ernest Renan, link the character of the Celtic races to a female sensibility

The scenic representation of Ireland in *Ondine* thus serves three main functions. It provides the base for the film's mythical atmosphere, it satisfies the viewer's touristic desires and it underlines the film's gender order.

Gender

In terms of gender relations, *Ondine* also remains within familiar patterns. According to the value system of national culturalism, the family made up the core unit of Irish society and expected strong allegiances from its members. Its protection as a social institution was enshrined in the 1937 Constitution of the Irish Republic[38]. *Ondine* criticises the social pressures and constraints that are side-effects of strong familial bonds in its depiction of Syracuse and Maura's destructive relationship, but it is rather limited in its perspective in that it only criticises the results of this for the father of the family. The film paints a portrait of the mother figure in black and white, with Syracuses's alcoholic and utterly irresponsible ex-wife Maura at one extreme and Ondine as potential substitute mother at the other. Their antagonism could not be more evident or more stereotypical. Ondine is a fair, gentle and delicate creature, the ideal and idealised fairy-tale mother. Her home is always flooded with light, decorated with flowers, clean and neat. Her affection for Syracuse's daughter is genuine; she even puts Annie's well-being over her own happiness. Maura, her antagonist, is dark-haired, loud-mouthed and slightly obscene, wears shirts with revealing necklines and is generally more interested in her own pleasure than in giving her daughter the home that she needs. Although the angel-whore dichotomy evoked by the juxtaposition of the two mother figures is ironically deconstructed when the selkie legend is dissolved, revealing Joanna as the "fallen" woman, Neil Jordan

(See Catherine L. Innes, *Woman and Nation in Irish Literature and Society 1880-1935*, New York and London, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993, p. 9). This idea obviously went hand in hand with the political situation of Ireland as a colonised country, which, just as the African countries were infantilised or feminised to justify the colonial power of Great Britain. The fashioning of Ireland as feminine is thus a two-edged sword, as is also illustrated by the two female allegories that embody Ireland, Hibernia and Erin. In *Punch* cartoons, Hibernia is represented as the fair virginal maiden, helpless and passive, who needs protection (offered by helpful and warrior-like Britannia), whereas Erin passes as the dark-haired, stately, motherly figure who is more courageous and mature. (See Catherine Innes, *op. cit.*, p. 15-17.)

38. Article forty-one of the 1937 Constitution ratified under Eamon de Valera announces : "The state recognises the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law. In particular the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved. The state shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that Mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home. The State pledges itself to guard with special care the institution of Marriage, on which the Family is founded" (Siobhan Kilfeather, "Irish Feminism", in Cleary, J. and Connolly, C. (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 107).

manages to prevent Joanna's past as a prostitute from spoiling her overall image, since the fairy-tale plot keeps the upper hand throughout most of the film. Even after the pivotal turn in the storyline, the viewers' sympathies stay on her side, because she literally and figuratively saves Annie and Syracuse in the end when her "selkie husband", *i.e.* the drug dealer and pimp, takes them hostage and thus endangers a happy ending. Ondine incorporates all domestic ideals of womanhood involuntarily, but not against her will: having to hide in the cabin, her existence limited to the private sphere, she gladly takes on the role of the angel in the house, the pleasantly pleasing housekeeper and potential foster mother to Annie and moral support to Syracuse[39]. She is a passive character throughout most of the film, except for the two scenes when she has to react in order to protect her adopted family. This happens when Annie, wanting to test her, falls off a pier and is in danger of drowning (00:53:30), and later in the film when Ondine pushes her pimp and his helper over board to save Syracuse and Annie (01:30:50). Her domestic fate is sealed in the final shot, when Syracuse marries her to make her a national and restore her reputation, so that she, in return, can complete the family unit and the film's exclusively inclusive vision of Irishness.

The cult of motherhood in Ireland, symbolised for instance by the veneration of the Virgin Mother Mary, the images of Mother Ireland and Mother Church, has been debunked and dismantled by many Irish critics[40] and Jordan is doubtlessly aware of this. When Syracuse explains, "This is Ireland. Men like me don't get custody" (00:56:10), the film of course criticises conservative conceptions of the nuclear family and its role allocations. Nonetheless, by exposing Maura as an unacceptable mother figure and simply replacing her with Ondine as the "ideal" mother, the traditional image of motherhood and the nuclear family remain ultimately unchallenged. The solution offered is a revival of the myth of motherhood, except for the fact that Ondine combines another aspect of womanhood which openly clashes with the classic de-sexualised Irish mother. She evidently represents a gender construct created by men for men: the domestic ideal of a "mother Ireland" figure meets the sex appeal of a Hollywood creation. Embodied by the Polish actress Alicja Bachleda, who fits well into Hollywoodian paradigms of female beauty, this artificial hybrid is constructed in the film by focussing on her character's mysteriousness. In her first appearance, she is the beautiful stranger, who behaves oddly and speaks with a charming but unplaceable accent

39. In the case of Ireland, the cult of the Virgin Mary and the worshipping of the domestic ideal she represents come very close to the Victorian concept of the angel in the house. Catherine Innes cites the following "kitchen prayer", printed on a postcard and sold at the shrine of Knock, County Mayo, where the Virgin Mary made an apparition: *Lord of all pots and pans and things/Since I've not time to be a saint/By doing lovely things/Or watching late with Thee/Or dreaming in the dawn light/Or storming heaven's gates/Make me a saint by getting/Meals and washing up the plates*. (See Catherine Innes, *op. cit.*, p. 41)

40. See Catherine Innes, *op. cit.*; Gerardine Meaney, *op. cit.*; Martin McLoone, *op. cit.*, 2000.

(00:04:30). Throughout the film, she remains an outsider *vis-à-vis* the local community, where she is an attraction : wherever she goes, she is a subject to gazing curiosity. Her stylisation as a selkie marks her as the exotic other and contributes to her eroticisation. It also enables her to appear completely innocent and naive since she has no past. Freed from all former relations, Ondine the selkie seems to have been re-virginised upon going on land, as is also suggested by her initial reluctance in the love-making scene with Syracuse (00:56:50). Moreover, she is repeatedly shown either in the sea or still wearing wet clothes and having wet hair. In one of the key scenes inscribing the selkie legend into the film, Ondine is visited by Syracuse's daughter Annie for the first time (00:31:20). Annie wants to quiz Ondine to see if the selkie story makes sense and surprises her while she is swimming, wearing a semi-transparent dress, which, when wet and crumpled, looks like algae (00:31:35). The moment when Ondine steps out of the water is reminiscent of notorious bikini scenes in James Bond films, in particular *Dr. No* (1962), and Ondine therefore becomes the object of a voyeuristic gaze (00:32:23). What Laura Mulvey formulated in her seminal article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" is still just as applicable to Neil Jordan's film: "The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly[41]". Indeed, what is contrasted here is male scopophilia and female "to be looked-at-ness" as Mulvey termed it[42], and in this particular scene, Ondine's erotic presence basically stops the flow of the action for the moment of contemplation. In *Ondine*, the spectator's viewpoint is either that of the director or that of the male protagonist, which forces female viewers into the male perspective, as it is the male protagonist who controls the gaze and thus the action of the film. This effect is reinforced by the fact that most of what Ondine wears in the film are not clothes she chooses herself, but what Syracuse gives her, such as the underwear she is shown in, as well as a tight-fitting black summer dress (00:30:35). Other shots repeatedly focus the audience's gaze on Ondine's bare legs, for instance when she puts on her boots (00:24:03), the net tights Syracuse gave her (00:30:10) or tries to handle the steering wheel of Syracuses' boat with her foot (00:41:18). The sexualised representation of Ondine can of course be brought into line with the allurement of her mythical predecessors, such as Undine. However, Jordan's portrait of Ondine is not that of a seductress deliberately seeking the male gaze, and thus draws a line between her previous life as a sex worker and her new, "purified" life in Ireland. On the contrary, throughout the first half of the film, Ondine explicitly tries to avoid being seen at all – her rescuer Syracuse enjoys the exclusi-

41. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", Con Davis R. and Schleifer R. (eds.), *Contemporary Literary Criticism, Literary and Cultural Studies,* 4th ed, New York, Longman, 1998, p. 451.
42. *Ibid.,* p. 451.

vity of looking at her, a pleasure he later has to share with other men, as Ondine ventures to accompany him into town.

Conversely, the female spectators are denied the possibility of satisfying their (heterosexual) desire in looking, because, as Mulvey has equally explained in her essay: "The male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like[43]". In the more than 35 years after the publication of "Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema", this reluctance on behalf of the male figure has been overcome and the male body has been plentifully exposed to the spectator's gaze. *Ondine,* however, remains fully within the vein of Mulvey's suggestion, as its male protagonist is indeed never shown through the lens of voyeuristic desire. Not only does the camera rarely zoom in on his body – Syracuse is either shown in long shots or medium shots, there are only few close-ups – but his body is also mostly covered in a fisherman's overall or in woollen jumpers and thus remains inaccessible to the female gaze.

It is striking that although Mulvey's concept of the male gaze has been challenged and reappropriated for female scopophilia, Neil Jordan openly goes back to it in *Ondine*. The overall gender discourse of the film thus parallels the old-fashionedness of the representation of the archetypal Irish landscape. Despite the fact that the film is forward in its support of the rights of the single male parent, the relationships between man and woman remain encrusted in patriarchal patterns, which are underscored by the director's filming and editing techniques.

Identity

The portrait of Irish society and identity in *Ondine* oscillates between the affirmation of stereotypes and their deconstruction. Since the film revisits a Celtic legend and since it is set in rural small-town community, it necessarily runs the risk of fading in with imaginations of rural Ireland and the Irish "peasantry" that have their fixed place in Irish history[44]. However, the characters who seem stereotypically Irish at first glance, such as the drinker or the priest, have been redesigned and adapted to late twentieth or twenty-first century Irish standards. Hence, Syracuse, both a former alcoholic and a superstitious, uneducated fisherman with the telling nickname "Circus", initially seems to be a variation of the stage Irishman. What saves him from being a mere stock character is his firm resolve to

43. *Ibid.,* p. 452.

44. The Irish peasantry and the Irish past tended to be romanticised and idealised by the Irish or Celtic Literary Revival as embodied by Lady Gregory, Yeats and Edward Martyn. As manifested in the foundational text of the Irish National Theatre (1899), they wanted to "show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an *ancient idealism*" (in Eavan Boland, ed., *Irish Writers on Writing*, San Antonio, Trinity University Press, 2007, p. 8, my italics). The difference between the two is a precarious one, though.

stay dry and take on responsibility for his and his daughter's life – the resilient fallen man being another character that is close to stock, too, of course. Similarly, the character of the priest is less a representative of the Catholic Church than an advisor and substitute AA Chapter for Syracuse. He still represents conservative Catholic values but has accepted that these no longer have a dominant influence on the life of his community. For instance, he offers to arrange marriage counselling for Syracuse and Maura, but he does not insist when Syracuse refuses (00:27:20). Neither is he offended that Syracuse does not attend mass. *Ondine*'s representation of the Church is thus a break with the religious ideals of cultural nationalism. However, the film does not fundamentally criticise the Church. Although it portrays the Church as having lost its function as a moral and spiritual institution, it does not tap into recent criticism resulting from child abuse and corruption scandals or the publication of the Ryan Report in 2009[45].

The portrait of the community itself is worth analysing rather for what is absent than for what is present. First, as I have argued above, the film evokes the image of a community living sheltered from the modern world and its intrusive communication technologies such as emails, text messages and the Internet. When Annie does her research about selkies, she does not use Google but borrows books from the local library. The community is like a secluded island, so remote that these technologies are not yet part of everyday life. There is a sense that the community is satisfied with what little entertainment it has. The local regatta is the social highlight of the year, and the local nightlife is displayed as surprisingly vibrant, given the size of the town, thus echoing more cliché images of Ireland which have reached international fame: Irish pub culture and the sociable spirit of the Irish. Second, Castletownbere is shown to be a solely white, and at first glance also exclusively Irish community. The only non-Irish in the film are Ondine, her pimp and his helpers, all of them Eastern European criminals and possibly asylum seekers. What is significant about this is that it is one of these "outsiders" to the community who mends the Irish family unit, but officially not until she has legally been made an Irish citizen[46]. Ondine's integration into the small-town

45. The Ryan Report was a publication by the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, which researched "the institutionalization, degradation and casual torture of children by religious orders acting with the active collusion and support of the state in Ireland between 1930 and 1980". (Gerardine Meaney, *op. cit.*, p. xv).

46. In 2004, the Irish people decided in a referendum that Irish citizenship is no longer alloted on a *jus soli* basis but on a *jus sanguinis* basis, *i.e.* it is restricted on the principles of kinship and ethnicity (See Gerardine Meaney, *op. cit.*, p. xv). In the preceding decade, Ireland had experienced fast rates of immigration, with large numbers of immigrants from the EU12 countries (*i.e.* the newer member states of the EU: Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Bulgaria and Romania). The vast approval of the referendum kindled many debates in Ireland about xenophobia and racism. However, the Irish Central Statistics Office points out that "[t]he number of immigrants from the EU12 States is estimated at 5,800 in the year to April 2010, representing a continuing decline from the peak of 52,700 in the year ending April 2007". A decade of influx was thus followed by a new tide of emigration, the largest groups of emigrants being the Irish themselves and returning EU12 citizens.

society is helped by the fact that she is presented as the "ideal" immigrant: she masters the language, her physical appearance is indistinguishable from the Irish, her background is distinctly European. Her inclusion into the community is therefore suggestive of an elevation into a selected circle of people who can claim to be "authentically" Irish in an almost culturally nationalist sense of the word: living in a rural small town community surrounded by mythical scenery, relying on the local fishing industry, not caring about the outside world. Jordan both romanticises and reappropriates this image of Irishness so that it is still attractive to twenty-first-century spectators. For this reason, one pillar of cultural nationalism is excluded from *Ondine*: the Gaelic language. The average audience, especially overseas, has neither a knowledge of nor a connection to this language, which in the film can only briefly be heard once when Annie switches channels on TV and stops at TG 4, the Gaelic TV channel (01:21:00). This scene is also the only instance in the film where an element of globalised popular culture enters the film's premodern bubble of Irishness. Annie, still flicking through the TV channels, briefly stops to listen to a concert by Sigur Rós, an Icelandic band that sings in its mother tongue and that is known for its ethereal and "mystic" melodies, which fit the mysterious atmosphere evoked by the film. Annie is familiar with popular music, but for Syracuse the TV acts as a *deus ex machina* because when he recognises a Sigur Rós tune that Ondine had sung, he realises that she is not a selkie (01:21:50).

It is by no means a perfect or even utopian society that is represented in *Ondine*, but one that incorporates many of the received ideas that have made Irish culture so appealing all over the world: the beautiful scenery (and, implicitly, the attributes that the visitor associates with it, such as tranquillity, purity, nativeness), the slow life, close-knit communities, pub culture and the slightly "strange" but infinitely likeable people. The "unappealing" aspects of Irish society such as alcoholism or the narrow-mindedness and curiosity of small town dwellers are eventually overlooked by the viewers, because of the hopeful and happy ending. Consequently, Neil Jordan's film embraces the mainstream marketing of Irishness which has become more and more obvious in recent years. It suffices to cast a look at the official website of Tourism Brand Ireland, the marketing branch of the official tourist board of Ireland (both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland), to get a first impression of the outreach of this development. The website states: "Our brand is our reputation – an idea that resides in the hearts and minds of various audiences[47]". Ireland and Irishness can no longer be looked at just in terms of national identity and culture, they must also

47. "Ireland – Our Brand", *Tourism Ireland*, no pagination, 2008, [*http://www.tourismirelandbrand.com/our-brand*], last accessed 11 January 2012.

be comprehended as a brand sold – for money or fame – in the form of TV advertisements, brochures and books, via group identities in social networks such as *Facebook*, or in festivities such as St. Patrick's Day parades. So why not sell it in film, too? Whereas Jordan stylises Irishness as a selective identity in *Ondine*, Colin Graham in his 2001 study *Deconstructing Ireland* has promoted just the opposite approach. He considers Irishness to be globalised and available to everyone, if only in kitsch popular culture versions: "Kitsch scatters the remnants of Irish authenticity around the globe, allowing forms of ownership to visitor, emigrant and citizen alike [...] Selling itself and 'Ireland', kitsch recognises the brand name as the sign of a never-to-be-realised and thus never-to-be-broken promise[48]". To Graham, there is no such thing as an authentic and unique Ireland. He acknowledges that "the search for authenticity is a pervasive feature in Irish culture", but remarks that "when the authentic is sought for it moves further away from its supposedly authentic and unselfconscious object of reference[49]". This is what happens to Casteltownbere in *Ondine*: what seems to be authentic Irishness in a nutshell, the ideal location to make a film about contemporary Ireland, becomes a fairy-tale version of it, imbued in marketable kitsch. The result is that Irishness in *Ondine* ends up as a commodity, to be sold at the box office.

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Ondine is indeed marked by an in-betweenness, which is played out on several levels of meaning. The film does not just cross generic borders or mix elements of the Irish present and the Irish past, it also incorporates national as well as post-national notions of Irishness, answering the demands of its indigenous and of its diasporic viewers. It is not such a surprising move that *Ondine* deals with political realities by re-creating an imaginary country that never was, a country that Yeats imagined as "untouched by the corruption of modernity, [...] in touch with the magical and supernatural world, a place of heightened spirituality and harmony with nature[50]." At a time when contemporary Ireland is very much confronted with what is going on in the outside world, be it by the effects of the Hibernian hyena, new trends in immigration and emigration or the ongoing globalisation of Irish culture, a turn to the past appears to be a compensatory reaction. It seems as if *Ondine* has taken Yeats's romantic idealisation of Irishness as a blueprint, which is why it necessarily re-mythologises many aspects of Irish life that have already been deconstructed in other contemporary Irish films. As a side effect, however, the film comes closer to "First Cinema" representations of Ireland than to "Third Cinema" ones, selling an image similar to that which has been popularised by

48. Colin Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 171.
49. *Ibid.*, p. xi.
50. Christina Hunt Mahony, *Contemporary Irish Literature: Transforming Tradition*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1998, p. 2.

Irish-American productions in earlier periods of Irish film history. This is by no means an argument against a national cinema evidently influenced by its diaspora. Irish culture has been exported and has had an enormous impact worldwide, so that it is understandable that this movement goes on in both directions. The real challenge in Irish cinema is to recognise and take in all of these impacts and not to create a hierarchy of notions of Irishness that are either commodified for the masses as "Brand Ireland" or restricted to a small insider group clinging on to their belief in an unspoilt authenticity.